Foreword

Mike Higton

The title should give it away: this is a book about Jesus of Nazareth. It is not a book about 'story', nor about 'narrative theology'. Hans Frei was not a theologian of story or of narrative in any general way, and this book is neither about the narrative quality of our existence, and the gospel's relation to that quality, nor about the narrative shape of the scriptures as a whole, and the call on us to place ourselves within that narrative.

Rather, this is a book about the way in which Jesus of Nazareth's identity is rendered by the Gospels – largely the Synoptic Gospels, particularly the Gospel of Luke, and especially in the passion and resurrection sequences – by means of a certain kind of narrative.

At the same time that he was writing *The Identity of Jesus Christ,* Frei was working on *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*[1]. In *Eclipse*, he traced changes in biblical interpretation that took place in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He claimed that there had been, prior to that period, something of a consensus in Christian biblical reading. Certain realistic ('history-like') narrative texts in the Bible were taken to make directly available to the reader the history of God's ways with the world. A literary exploration of those narratives, and of the patterns by which they echo one another, would at the same time be an exploration of history and of the providential patterns of God's activity that shape it. With the rise, however, of historical criticism, it became increasingly possible to distinguish between the text and the history to which it referred. Biblical texts started to be taken (by both conservative and liberal interpreters) as more or less reliable evidence for the reconstruction of the history that lay behind them, and the literary form in which they recounted that history, to the extent that it was taken seriously at all, became one more bit of evidence in a historical argument. Where that didn't happen, and the historical reliability of the texts did not become or remain the focus, the biblical texts were taken

[1] *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974). *The Identity of Jesus Christ* was published in 1975, but the bulk of it was a very light revision of 'The Mystery of the Presence of Jesus Christ', a pair of long articles published in *Crossroads: An Adult Education Magazine of the Presbyterian Church* 17.2 (Jan–Mar 1967), pp.69–96 and 17.3 (Apr–Jun 1967), pp.69–96, though with a new Preface and a concluding meditation.

instead to be poetic encodings of a religious way of seeing the world, and as capable of triggering the development of analogous ways of seeing in their readers. The literary reading of realistic narrative *as* realistic narrative slipped into the background.

In *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, Frei pursues not a generalised reversal of that eclipse of biblical narrative, but one localised response. *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* had itself not been about the Bible as a whole, but about specific narrative portions of it. In *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, Frei's focus narrows still further: he offers a post-critical reading of the Gospels that takes seriously the fact that – at least in the passion–resurrection sequences in the Synoptics – they contain a certain kind of realistic narrative. Frei argued that these particular narratives render the identity of their central character, Jesus Christ.

Realistic, or 'history-like' narratives are capable of rendering identities in such a way as to give them a certain objectivity, a certain over-againstness in relation to the reader. We can discuss the characters of a realistic novel, for instance, as if they were real people, argue about them with each other, make claims about them and be proved wrong. Frei argued that something similar is possible with the Gospels. Whatever we may think about their historicity, they make available to us, simply by the way that they are written, a character: the Jesus of the Gospels. And they do so in such a way that this character stands over against us with his own integrity and density. We can discuss him, analyse him, make claims about him, be proven wrong about him. If we read these texts for the character that they render, they prove not simply to be wax noses that we can remould in whatever way suits our fancy.

In *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, Frei tries to show us just how it is that these particular texts render an identity. He does not develop or draw on a general theory of narrative identification; other texts – including other realistic narratives – might work quite differently. He tries instead to describe what happens when we read these specific texts as renderings of their central character. To produce these descriptions, he invents some quite cumbersome machinery, and does not perhaps achieve quite the clarity that he was hoping for. He was, after all, making it up as he went along – working largely on his own, without many useful precedents, to find ways of capturing with precision what happens as we read these particular texts, building his analytic machines out of whatever conceptual fragments he could lay his hands on. What emerges is not exactly elegant – but it is certainly effective.

To say that the Gospels (at least the Synoptic Gospels, and particularly Luke, especially in the passion–resurrection sequence) contain realistic or history-like narrative

is, in the first place, to say that they depict a world of character and circumstance, where the characters are shaped by the circumstances, and the circumstances by the characters. It depicts a world of 'middle distance', in which the drama is acted out not so much in the deep psychological recesses of the characters, nor in the grand clashings of the historical forces by which the characters are caught up, but in the actions and interactions of people in a landscape.

In these narratives, the character of Jesus is rendered in large part simply by the description of what he *does* – his intentional action. On the whole, these narratives do not provide a psychological description of the formation of Jesus' intention, and create a drama out of the possibility that it will not be enacted; nor do they restrict themselves to describing Jesus' behaviour in such a way that one is left guessing as to whether the behaviour was voluntary or involuntary. They simply depict intentional actions – and Jesus is rendered as a character by telling the story of his actions, and of his embroilment in the actions of others. In response to a narrative that works like this, our primary recourse when we are asked who the Jesus of the Gospels is will be to retell the story of those actions and interactions, perhaps drawing attention to patterns that shape them, but not turning to a different level of description (the psychological or the epic) as anything other than an aside.

Frei was also aware, however, that this analysis of how the Gospels depict Jesus as a character was insufficient on its own. In particular, it wasn't very good at saying what was going on at the very end of the Gospels, in the resurrection sequences. Frei had shown how the patterns of intentional action and interaction build towards those resurrection sequences – but he did not think that it was sufficient to describe those sequences, and the Gospels' transition from crucifixion to resurrection, simply as patterns of intentional action. Rather, he noted that there is in the Gospels something like the slow build and sudden reveal of a mystery story – in which the 'reveal' is not so much an episode of Jesus' intentional action, as it is simply his reappearance (his bodily appearance, in some sense), and his being named with his familiar name. Frei tries to find an appropriate description for the ways in which this, too, is how the Gospels render this character, revealing something about who he is. Jesus, the same Jesus' whose story we have been reading, the character rendered to us by the depiction of his patterns of action and interaction, is now depicted as the resurrected one, the one given back to us by his Father, as the Father's action on our behalf. That is the climax of the narrative, the big reveal – and any attempt

that we now make to say who the Jesus of the Gospels is has to lead here: Jesus, the man from Nazareth, who is the resurrected one.

'Whatever we may think about their historicity,' I said above, these narratives 'make available to us, simply by the way that they are written, a character: the Jesus of the Gospels.' The question of historicity will not go away, however, and Frei was certainly not indifferent to it. He was insistent, however, that we should only ask the question of historicity in ways that do justice to the Gospels' nature as realistic narratives. If the Gospels render Jesus as a character in the way that I have just described, what does it mean to ask about their historicity – about what really happened?

Frei is clear that we can't simply avoid this question. He may have been approaching the Gospels almost as if they were realistic novels, but he doesn't think we can keep on treating them that way, as an entertaining fiction. Jesus is depicted as the resurrected one, the one who is God's action on our behalf. He is therefore depicted as one who impinges on us – one who demands acknowledgment from us. The story thereby insists that its world is our world, and forces us to ask whether or not we can accept that. (Imagine reading a horror story in bed at night, and finding that it finished by describing the vampire climbing the stairs in your own house, walking across your landing, reaching out a cold hand to your door… Having been willing while reading the bulk of the book to suspend your disbelief, to enter the world of the story *as if* it were real, you would be forced now to make a more explicit decision – either to confirm that the work is simply fiction, despite its attempt to pretend otherwise, or to reach for your bedside supply of holy water and garlic. The question of historicity would have been forced upon you.)

As Frei sees it, once we have read and understood the Gospels' presentations of Jesus' identity, we are faced with a decision. Either Jesus really was resurrected, the Gospels are at their central point true, and their world is our world, their God our God – or they are simply a fiction, albeit a fiction that tries and fails to include our real world within itself.

The Gospels, then, require us to ask what it means to accept that Jesus of Nazareth is indeed the resurrected one, the action of God on our behalf. In considering historicity, Frei focuses directly and exclusively on this question. He does not spend time on asking whether there really was someone called Jesus from Nazareth, who could plausibly be the original on with the Gospels are based, at whatever remove. He does not even spend time asking whether the Jesus of history is well-represented by the characteristic patterns of speech and action used by the Gospels to render their central character. Rather, he asks: What does it mean to affirm that Jesus of Nazareth really is – in our historical world, the

world of our actions and interactions – the resurrected one? If Jesus was not truly raised, if the resurrection did not truly happen in our historical world, then the Gospels are at their focal point untrue.

The story of the resurrection is, however, precisely the point at which the question of historicity is hard to ask well – not because of some generally problematic connection between narrative identity and historicity, but because of the particular nature of resurrection. Resurrection is not (as yet) the kind of thing that happens. It is, if it happened, unique, and its uniqueness is not simply a matter of the way in which a number of graspable strands of action and causality, each made up of the kind of thing that does happen, come together in an unprecedented combination. If the resurrection happened, it is qualitatively unique in a way that goes beyond that; it is the pivot on which the world turns. As such it is inevitably and irreducible a mystery – not because the texts that depict it are misty and vague, but because as utterly unique it is inherently beyond the kind of description that could make sense of it.

If the resurrection truly happened in the world of our actions and interactions, it will not be demonstrable by historical-critical means. The tools of historical-criticism are suited, as Frei understands them, to the kinds of thing that happen – and they are therefore unsuited to the resurrection. So, if the resurrection happened, we will not be able to demonstrate that it did. Frei does argue, however, that if it did *not* happen, it might be demonstrable that it did not. To think that historical criticism could demonstrate that a man, once firmly and unreservedly dead, would then be alive again, able to appear bodily, to act and to undergo action, is a nonsense; to think that historical criticism could demonstrate that a man, once firmly and unreservedly dead, would then remain dead, makes perfect sense. It does not matter that it is difficult to imagine what such a demonstration would look like in practice, at so great a historical remove, nor that it is difficult to imagine such a demonstration being taken seriously by most believers. Frei is not interested in setting out a practical strategy for falsification, but in clarifying the logic of the claim we can and must make, if we want to say that the Gospels are true and that their claim upon our lives is a claim that we acknowledge.

We must, if we acknowledge the Gospels' claim on us, say that Jesus of Nazareth truly is the resurrected one; we must say that he was truly resurrected in our historical world, the world of our action and interaction; we must say that, were it possible to demonstrate that Jesus remained mouldering in the grave, our faith would be shown to be misplaced – but we should not say that the truth of the resurrection will be demonstrable using the

tools of historical criticism, nor that we can describe what took place using the normal tools of historical description.

All of this is an example of what Frei would later call 'ad hoc apologetics' – an example of 'Type 4' in his later *Types of Christian Theology*[2]. He begins with Christian faith – in this case, with a Christian reading of Gospels, one that acknowledges and accepts their claim upon us. He then examines the logic of this aspect of Christian faith to see what claims it implies, and he asks what kind of engagement with other patterns of intellectual activity is allowed or required by these claims. If his analysis of the identification of Jesus in the Gospels had somehow led him to make claims of a kind that lay fully in the territory of the historical critic, then he would have been required to plunge fully into that territory, and abide by its rules. As it happens, he has argued that the Gospels do not, at their heart, make a claim that stands firmly within the historical critic's territory, but one that sits slightly awkwardly on that territory's edge. The engagement with the historical critics that Frei believes is required is governed not by some general theory of apologetics, nor by some general theory of the independence of Christian truth, but by the logic of the particular Christian claim he has in view.

Frei's book does not finish with the question of historicity. Rather, it moves on to ask what it might mean to believe the Gospel – to acknowledge Jesus as the resurrected one, the action of God on our behalf. He offers, as his answer, the beginnings of a political theology, though he does not at this point get much beyond some enigmatic hints.

In *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, Frei had spoken of figural interpretation as a natural accompaniment to the precritical reading of realistic narrative. Realistic narratives render to the reader the history of God's ways with the world, and the rendering they give is shaped by patterns of various kinds. For the precritical reader, the question of whether these patterns are patterns in God's ways with the world, patterns in the literary presentation of those ways, or patterns in the mind of the reader is a false trichotomy; it is only after the eclipse of Biblical narrative that such a question becomes pressing. Precritical figural interpretation works by spotting resemblances in the patterns displayed by different parts of the history of God's ways with the world, widely separated in time. Various patterns in the story of Joseph, for instance, resemble patterns in the story of Jesus: Joseph can therefore be read as a type or figure of Jesus, and reading the two

[2] *Types of Christian Theology*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

stories alongside one another can be expected to illuminate each – to drive us deeper into a recognition of the complex patterns that shape each depiction. To read Joseph and Jesus in this way is to understand the ways of God with the world more deeply, because the history of Joseph was given to us by God as an enacted prophecy of Jesus, and Jesus was given to us by God as the fulfilment of that prophecy (amongst many others).

In *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, Frei does not propose a wholesale retrieval of such figural interpretation. He does, however, suggest a direction in which a partial retrieval might travel. On one side, he sets his narrative reading of the Gospels, which has given rise to a patterned depiction of Jesus of Nazareth, who is the resurrected one and God's action on our behalf. On the other side, he sets attention to the patterns we discern in the history in which we are living – knowing it to be the same world in which Jesus was raised from the dead. Frei gives only the briefest of gestures here towards the kinds of attention he wants to advocate – but it is a gesture towards the patterns that we might find in the public world of action and interaction that surround us, the world (in the broadest sense) of politics. And then he suggests, if I understand him correctly, that spotting resemblances in the patterns we find on these two sides might be enough to initiate a process of figural reading – of seeing contemporary history and its patterns *in the light* of the history of Jesus of Nazareth depicted in the Gospels. This is no more than a hint, and Frei does not pursue it very far, here – and even when he returned to the same territory in later writings[3], he does not expand the hint very dramatically. Some such move is, nevertheless, crucial to the overall shape of his project. If the Gospel depiction of Jesus is not a fiction, then Jesus is an insistent presence in our world – and our ways of seeing and of negotiating our world can't but be reshaped by that presence.

There is one last comment to make about this book. In later years, Frei made a partial retraction of the argument he had set out here. He had made it sound, he said, as if the kind of narrative reading he had proposed was the only and the obvious way to read these texts, at least once their nature had been pointed out. He had made it sound, that is, as if this kind of reading were demanded simply by the fact that these texts were of the kind 'realistic narrative'. Frei had come to realise, however, that nothing forced readers to read

[3] See 'History, Salvation History, and Typology' (1981), 'To Give and To Receive' (1986) and 'Reinhold Niebuhr, Where Are You Now That We Need You?' (1986) in Hans W. Frei, *Reading Faithfully: Writings from the Archives*, ed. Mark Alan Bowald and Mike Higton (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, forthcoming).

this way, even when the nature of the text had been pointed out to them and the possibility of realistic narrative reading had been explained. Instead, he came to realise that we read this way simply because it is the way Christians have always read; it is the way of reading given to the church. That did not involve him abandoning or weakening his claim that these texts render a character to us in such a way that the character stands over against us. It did not involve him weakening his claim that they rendered a character for us in such a way as to give that character a certain objectivity. He simply accepted that this objectivity is registered only within a specific practice of reading, or a specific family of practices.

We might note – though Frei did not allow himself quite such a sweeping generalisation – that *all* forms of objectivity are only registered within particular practices. There is an objective fact of the matter about how many times the letter 'p' appears in this Foreword, for instance, but that objectivity will only be registered within a particular weave of practices, including practices of counting and of letter identification. Only to the extent that we are skilful practitioners of these practices will we be able to agree with other skilful practitioners about the number of times 'p' occurs. These practices enable our registering of the objective fact of the matter, and outside of these practices we will not encounter that objectivity. And we can ask about the history of those practices, about the patterns of social exchange that sustain them, and about their limits, without ever suggesting that the number of times the letter 'p' appears in this Foreword is subject to the whims of the community of readers. Just so with Frei. He went on in his later work to describe how the kind of objectivity he had explored here in *The Identity of Jesus Christ* appeared within Christian practice, and to identify the core elements of the practice in question – but there is no sign that he backed away from his analysis of where this kind of reading leads, and how. He argued that there had been and still was a very wide Christian consensus that one should read the Gospels as being, on the whole, a fit enactment of their authors' (or Author's) intention, and that one should read them as being about Jesus. He did not claim that Christians had agreed about where those assumptions led them – but that didn't mean he had given up on the idea that there *could* or *should* be such agreement. He remained convinced, as he had explained in this book, that once one gets started on this path – reading the Gospels' narrative identification of Jesus of Nazareth – it properly leads only in one direction: to the identification of Jesus of Nazareth as the resurrected one who is the action of God on our behalf – and the pivot around which our world turns.